

Learning from New Believers

Some of the most inspiring and instructive stories of the Five Year Plan recount the experiences of new believers. From these souls we are given a first-hand impression of what attracted them to the melody of Bahá'u'lláh's voice and what motivated them to walk the path of service. This is a type of learning that should stimulate our outreach and give us greater confidence in our teaching work. For ultimately our aim in the Plan is to assist "growing numbers of the world's people to find the Object of their quest" as the new Bahá'ís in the accounts below have been guided to do.

Many of the stories in this issue are drawn from clusters in Western countries where it is sometimes felt that people are less receptive to the Faith. The moving responses of the new believers in these areas testify to the fact that there are "ready souls" in every city and that the daily afflictions striking humanity are preparing hearts to receive the message of Bahá'u'lláh, if we but offer it directly. In a Ridván message the Universal House of Justice reminded us that we have "a sacred duty to perform towards every other one who is not yet aware of the call of God's latest Manifestation." That duty is teaching.

We now have the instrumentality of the institute process so that as we teach the Faith to seekers, they grow in insight and become committed to serving the Cause to the best of their abilities. As the following stories so compellingly affirm, a balance in expansion and consolidation is being achieved, even in areas where large numbers are enrolling. It is heartening to witness more and more in the teaching work the fulfillment of these inspired words by the House of Justice describing the true nature and purpose of the teaching process.

Teaching may also be likened to kindling a fire, the fire of faith, in the hearts of men. If a fire burns only so long as the match is held to it, it cannot truly be said to have been kindled; to be kindled it must continue to burn of its own accord.

This is the "state of enkindlement" that we hope will be expressed "in unremitting action in the field of service" by thousands upon thousands throughout the course of the Plan.

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Beginning to Walk a Path of Service. The following stories illustrate how new believers naturally begin to walk a path of service when their faith is enkindled and nurtured through their study of the Creative Word and their experience with the institute process.

United States

These accounts from the United States represent two very different areas of the country—Easley, South Carolina and San Francisco, California. But in both cases the loving attention of the friends and the transformative experience of the study circles fostered in the seekers a desire to arise and serve as soon as they embraced the Faith.

California. The path I have found myself upon these past six months is a glorious one, beginning as a search, and culminating in belief. I have seen glimpses of the Bahá'í Faith throughout my life and was blessed to meet my friend Mona, who wears the beauty

of the Baha'i religion as the precious jewel that it is. She taught me much about the Faith and upon relocating to the San Francisco area, a deeper exploration of the Faith and its community was a top priority of mine. The memory of my initial visit to the Bahá'í Center in San Francisco will never escape me. I entered knowing no one and left feeling immersed within and a part of a warm and open community. Within a week's time I was scheduled to participate in the first of what has come to be many study circles. This particular study circle was structured around Book 1, *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*.

As I have come to see through my participation in the Ruhi program, each book is designed to provide its reader with a more lucid and concrete understanding of the Faith itself, beginning with exposure to excerpts from Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and carrying on with investigating and penetrating questions regarding the concepts within the Bahá'í revelation. In the study circle on Ruhi Book 1, I was given an opportunity to understand the nature of the Bahá'í religion and also the Bahá'í community. Two wonderful facilitators conducted our weekly classes, both playing a formative role in my understanding of the beauty and depth of the Faith. Their capacity to answer my endless questions with patience and wisdom never ceased to amaze me, and I hope to one day have the ability to teach as they have taught.

Upon the conclusion of Book 1, I had declared myself a Bahá'í, as that was my path to travel. The incredible thing is that one need not be a Bahá'í to feel as though they are a part of the community. I felt as welcomed the first day I entered the doors of the Center as I did on the evening of my declaration. It is open doors and hearts which Bahá'u'lláh calls us to share with one another, and I as a recipient of these favors can only hope to give, as I have been given to.

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South Carolina. The story about one friend, Melanie, began when she and I met at library story time. We were both pregnant with our now almost five-year-old girls. As new friends, we kept in touch and occasionally met for lunch and went to free summer movies. Two years ago, while talking on the phone about home schooling (which Melanie does with her children), the subject of the Bahá'í Faith casually came up. Melanie had seen the Bahá'í sign on the highway in Easley and had meant to call the number, but still hadn't. Acting immediately, I took books and information to Melanie the next day and invited her to bring her children to children's class. Melanie gladly came with her three children.

The opportunities to teach Melanie flowed naturally. Most every week my son and I went to Melanie's home around the corner from where my daughters were taking gymnastics. The visits helped to develop a friendship and allowed Melanie a chance to ask more questions or share what she was learning. Melanie was invited to attend a Book 1 study circle in Easley and was joined by her husband, Steve. The local Bahá'ís worked together to nurture and support Melanie. Many prayers were said to Bahá'u'lláh to guide and help her. Melanie declared her belief in Bahá'u'lláh in May 2005.

She continues to enthusiastically participate in the study circles, attend Feast, support children's classes, and has even partnered with another Bahá'í to start a home visit prayer team. Together they and Melanie's children (ages 10, 8, and 4) visit Bahá'ís who are isolated or sick and share prayers with them.

Melanie is also teaching! One challenge for Melanie has been the response from her home school friends in this Bible Belt area. Melanie has remained steadfast, shares her Faith, and continues to deepen her knowledge of the Bible and its fulfillment in the Bahá'í Faith.

Australia

It all happened about four years ago. It was a sunny Saturday morning and I had an appointment to have my hair colored. I was sitting next to a lady whose slant on life was so refreshing and uplifting that I became stirred with spirit. And so began my journey to Bahá'u'lláh and the Faith.

As a consequence of this meeting (and a few delicious morning teas with other friends), I was invited to participate in a study circle. I was not sure what all this meant but found the idea captivating.

My new friends introduced me to religious concepts I had not been exposed to before. The freedom to comment in a safe environment was encouraged and valued and this premise was the beginning of my awakening.

Through the continued exposure to the Words of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my knowledge of other world faiths and their evolution began to fall into place. This was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me, as these were in fact the questions I had been asking all my life. Finally I was in an environment which not only had the knowledge I sought but also those who were equipped to discuss and answer all my enquiries.

The regular exposure to the prayers began to enrich and change my life. The weekly passages and their translations were of a constant amazement to me and I began to notice a shift in my approach to relationships, work, my life, and my actions.

The group not only filled in the gaps but offered a deepening of my spirit through the dynamics of discussion. This could not have been achieved alone. I have studied distance education for seven years and can speak from experience. There just isn't the same deepening, which is required to obtain the full riches of the Faith, by doing the study alone! The excellence of ideas put forward in the study group, the enthusiasm behind each answer or enquiry, was in itself an acceleration of my spiritual growth and provided me with plenty to contemplate and meditate on until I was to meet my group again the next week.

One of the things which amazed me was the friends I was meeting through the study circle. These were people I would call "evolved." I was amazed that finally after all this time on the planet I had met like-minded people who were prepared to discuss subjects I had only idealized about.

As an outcome of studying Book 1, I was able to hold my first devotional meeting. I was unsure what this devotional was about but was given some supportive ideas. The wonderful thing about the devotional process was that it gave me the opportunity to invite people to my home who were curious about the changes they had seen in me and were interested in meeting my new friends.

I found that this raised interest and I was able to arrange for a few people to partake in Book 1—*Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*. This allowed me to share and support their spiritual journey as well as enjoy the progress of us all working together.

New Believers Becoming Active Servants of the Cause. *We should never underestimate the capacity of new believers to take up the tasks of expansion and consolidation as soon as they enroll. In fact, many seekers are motivated to carry out activities when they are in study circles and often these acts of service lead them to greater conviction and to a declaration of faith.*

India

One of the visitors to the House of Worship near New Delhi became very interested in studying the Faith because of his visit to the Information Center on the grounds of the House of Worship. He and one of his friends began to regularly attend a study circle at 7:00 in the morning when they finished working the night shift. After completing that book, both seekers declared and went on to complete Ruhi Institute Book 2.

After completing the second course, the new believer pledged to teach one person a day; but as soon as he made this resolution, his work took him away to another place for some months and he was unable to fulfill his pledge. When he returned home, he was determined to make up for lost time and began to visit three or four of his friends a day in order to teach them the Faith. In one month's time he carried out 90 home visits. His devoted teaching work led 16 of his friends to embrace the Cause. Using what he has learned through the institute process, he continues to visit these new believers and accompanies them to the House of Worship for dawn prayers. He is also trying to engage them all in the sequence of courses.

France

The story below brilliantly illustrates the spiritual power and influence of young children when they accept and serve Bahá'u'lláh.

Luc, a very cute, blue-eyed French boy, has been my son's best friend since we moved to our town five years ago. Luc is now 10 years old. I decided to organize a children's class at our home. Luc's parents defined themselves as atheists but when I proposed that Luc join the class, they fully agreed.

Little by little, the parents noticed Luc was changing; he was more polite, calmer and very keen on reciting prayers. After a few months, his mother Anne told us he had a question she could not answer and suggested he ask me. He looked very serious. I could never imagine what his question might be: "*Tell me Roxana, how could I be a Bahá'í?*"

It was one of the best days of my life! His beautiful eyes were shining and he was anxiously waiting for my answer. So I started explaining to him what it meant to be a Bahá'í, what it implied, and that his parents should know about his decision. His mother asserted that she totally agreed with his decision because her son had never been as happy as he was since he had met the Bahá'í Faith! And that she would even bring him to the Feasts and fetch him back.

From that time, we all considered him as a member of our community. Little by little, Anne was transformed too; she bought a picture of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and put it in her

living room. She completed Book 1, organized a prayer meeting at her home, stated she believed in God, and recited Bahá'í prayers every day. The first word she taught her baby girl was: "Alláh-u-Abhá!" Then, she helped me with children classes, studied Book 3, and felt she could be a teacher on her own.

Last Naw-Rúz, two years after Luc's declaration, Anne accepted the Faith during a children's class. Her son loudly reacted: "*Oh! Thank God, at last you've declared!*" She always says he is the one who brought her *to faith* and *to the Faith*.

His mother's declaration helped Luc to gain a stronger Bahá'í identity. The next day he told his friends at school he was a Bahá'í and wanted to wear the Greatest Name. "*This sign will always protect me,*" he told them.

Anne has been appointed as my assistant. I have tried my best to accompany her in her understanding of the Plan and in her activities. Her specific task is to follow up children's classes.

Last week, Luc organized with the help of his mother a prayer meeting at his home for the children of both Bahá'í classes. About 12 of them attended it. They all went back home with a copy of the prayers and a written explanation of progressive revelation. As it was Ayyám-i-Há, Luc told his mother that they should go to visit his great-grandmother who is in a home for the aged and do a prayer meeting for her.

I can confirm that Anne and Luc are among the most active Bahá'ís in the cluster. Now Anne is accompanying other Bahá'ís to organize their own neighborhood classes. Last week, her husband asked her about all her activities. She simply explained to him that Bahá'ís have a plan with four specific activities to spiritualize humanity. He said "OK, go on. I'm proud of you and Luc!"

Australia

A single mother of two, a renowned local artist, became interested in the Faith because of her children's participation in the Bahá'í Education in State Schools (BESS) program. This interest prompted her to participate in a Book 1 study circle. She then went on to complete the second course in the series. During her investigation of the Faith, she began to assist with the BESS classes at her children's school. The demand for the classes had grown to such a degree that there was a need to split the classes into smaller groups, but there was a problem because of legal requirements that only Bahá'ís were allowed to teach a class without the assistance of another teacher. The mother, recognizing this need, saw it as both a challenge and a responsibility and decided not to postpone becoming a declared believer! She is now a full member of the team of teachers carrying out Bahá'í classes at the school.

As new believers are brought into the Cause through a teaching project in a receptive area, the challenge is to consolidate them and mobilize them into active service. The experience from teaching projects in two major urban clusters demonstrates that the institute process is key to attaining this goal.

India

The following accounts are from new believers in New Delhi who entered the Faith after a direct teaching project in their neighborhoods. It is clear that they understand their newfound commitment and are eager to gain the skills to serve the Cause.

I got the opportunity to visit the Bahá'í House of Worship with my family. I liked the atmosphere so much that I decided to find out more about it. After a few months I visited again, and then whenever I had free time I used to go to the Temple and loved to spend time there. Now I am working near there so I have the opportunity to visit my favorite place and avail myself of spiritual upliftment. Then I began to visit the Temple every Sunday and received information first through pamphlets, and then in the library, where I could read Bahá'í and other religious books.

I used to enjoy thoroughly the prayer sessions in the Temple. After some time I had a chance to visit the information center. There one volunteer lady helped me and provided all the information I needed. I learned about study circles in Delhi and in my area and joined one. After finishing three-quarters of Ruhi Book 1, I felt my life was totally changed. I tried to live according to Ruhi Book 1; I felt very calm and learned how to adjust with my family, neighbors, relatives, friends, and colleagues in my office.

Recently in April, I joined the Bahá'í community, and my dream is now to finish all the Ruhi books with proper understanding, and serve the Faith and also humanity as a whole.

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After Mr. Mukherjee accepted the Faith in October 2006, he immediately entered the institute process. During the expansion phase two months later, he held a small fireside in his home where he invited his closest friends. Five individuals enrolled in his home. He also offered to host in his area a large-scale devotional gathering which was followed by a direct teaching presentation. This was the first core activity in his area. However, he knew a lot of people in his neighborhood and was confident that he could invite a large number of seekers. After the direct teaching that night, 13 individuals enrolled. It also happened that after the teaching team had left the gathering, four of Mr. Mukherjee's friends arrived. He did not want them to lose out so he phoned the friends in the teaching team and asked them to tell his friends about the Faith on the phone! The Auxiliary Board member, who was also his tutor, told Mr. Mukherjee that he had heard Anna's presentation several times over the past few months and that he should say a prayer and go ahead with confidence. The Board member told him to trust in Bahá'u'lláh and to teach his friends based on what he knows. Well, Mr. Mukherjee called back, half an hour later, and said that those four friends had also enrolled! This new believer helped lead 17 souls to the Cause.

United States

Frank, aged 83, was the first person to declare during the College Park teaching project in Atlanta, Georgia. "I will never forget when I became a Bahá'í. It was the most glorious day of my life!" said Frank when he and six other members of the College Park Local Assembly attended a recent Assembly conference organized by the Auxiliary Board member.

I remember sitting on the porch one day listening to music and was approached by two believers who came to my apartment and explained the Faith to me. The word that struck me the most was "unity." They gave me some literature and the address of devotional meetings I could go to. Sure enough, I went a couple of days later. I was really impressed. I had never seen so many diverse and happy faces in my life! From there I went on to investigate the Faith and became a Bahá'í.

Frank took Book 1 twice and then Book 2, and 18 months later he was elected to the Local Spiritual Assembly. He has been holding devotional gatherings for seekers and serves them meals he cooks himself. For his last gathering not only did he spend time making preparations, but he visited friends and invited them. Eight seekers participated. Frank has had a longing to go on pilgrimage. As he could not wait for his turn to come, he decided to go for three days. To realize this dream and despite the lack of means and transportation, he made two trips to Alabama to find his birth records and obtain a passport. When Frank is asked about the Faith, his response is always the same, “It’s been a glorious journey!”

Here are a few other brief examples of new believers arising to serve and putting their newfound skills into action:

- **El Salvador.** A youth who participated in a Bahá’í junior youth group declared and is now a teacher of children’s classes and assists a junior youth animator. Her desire to teach others led to her mother becoming a believer as well, and her enthusiasm and example have inspired other youth in her area.
- **Mauritius.** After a new believer attended a reflection meeting, he realized the importance of initiating core activities. He visited his neighbors, family, and friends and invited them to a devotional meeting in his home. Ninety-six (96) persons have attended his devotional gatherings. As a result of his contacts with nearly 500 individuals, four new study circles began and the number of non-Bahá’í children attending children’s classes increased from 9 to 35.
- **United Kingdom.** A new believer plunged into the sequence of courses shortly after he became a Bahá’í and finished the sequence during the course of a few months. He subsequently pioneered to Colombia where he is serving as a cluster institute coordinator for the Ruhi Institute.

***Receptivity of the Seekers.** Stories abound from Bahá’ís who are realizing that their acquaintances are more open to the Faith than they had anticipated and that receptivity exists even among groups where they did not expect it. Should we be surprised that the power of the Creative Word of God is our greatest instrument in the teaching work? The friends are also learning that receptive souls need to be warmly invited to join the Faith.*

Belgium

One tutor kept a close relationship with the participants in his study circle by visiting them frequently. He made a point of telling them anecdotes from the lives of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in order to bring the Central Figures of the Faith closer to their hearts.

When his Book 1 study circle was drawing to an end, he decided to spend a whole session on the last four questions in Book 1 which relate to recognizing the station of Bahá’u’lláh. He asked each participant all four questions separately, to which most of them answered “yes.” He then asked them what conclusions they were able to draw from their answers. Some were, according to the tutor, scared or shy to admit the obvious and he gently insisted by asking them: “If your heart answers ‘yes’ to all these questions, could one not consider that you were touched by the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh? Can it be said that your heart has been enkindled with the love for His message? Does this not mean that we can consider you a Bahá’í?” Three of the participants of that particular study circle became Bahá’ís.

Australia

One member of a study circle (Chris) had a friend in his office who was Persian like him and from a Muslim background. He came from Canada and had told Chris that in Canada he had also had a Bahá'í friend who would not tell him much about the Faith. So Chris decided that this was the right opportunity, now that Bahá'ís are encouraged to teach trusted Muslim friends. Chris explained that he was taking this course and wanted to share some words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He explained who 'Abdu'l-Bahá was and began to discuss the selection. The passage dealt with how we should treat each other.

The office friend was very impressed and felt that this was certainly something he also believed in. He was grateful when Chris indicated that the beautifully presented verse from the Writings was a gift for him. The next day, feeling low at the end of a stressful day, Chris met his Muslim friend in the office hallway. He was uplifted when the friend exclaimed that he had found the selection from the Bahá'í Writings so beautiful and relevant. He then went on to say that he loved this passage so much he had photocopied it and shared it with most of the colleagues in the office and asked whether Chris minded? At that point, another office colleague walked by, this one of Jewish background. He mentioned his joy at receiving the quotation and described its relevance. It seemed to him as if 'Abdu'l-Bahá had opened the newspaper, read the shocking news of the day, and prescribed a remedy for the ills He had found.

United Kingdom

One of the exercises in Book 4 involves memorizing a long passage from the Writings of the Báb. A participant in a Book 4 study circle decided that he needed help and so asked a colleague at work to be his “study buddy.” This friend spent 10 to 15 minutes a day for a couple of months working with the Bahá'í on memorizing and reciting the words from the Holy Text. This daily exposure to the Creative Word touched the friend's heart, so she was invited to join a Book 1 study circle. At the conclusion of the course she enrolled in the Faith. Three months later she completed Book 2. Her stated goal is to serve the Cause by becoming a tutor and a teacher of children's classes.

Indonesia

One day a young woman approached a group of Bahá'ís and stated that she would like to be enrolled in the Faith. The believers were quite surprised because the young lady had never been seen at a Bahá'í gathering. The young woman explained that she had listened through the wall of her home to a study circle that was held in the house next door and that now she too wanted to be a Bahá'í!